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# The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology

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## INTRODUCTION

As a cursory browse through the Synoptic Gospels confirms, exegetes and theologians are unanimous in pointing out that the kingdom of God is the central symbol or theme of Jesus' proclamation, mission and praxis<sup>1</sup>. The fine thread of this paradigmatic notion is intricately woven into the gospel both as its leitmotiv and ultimate consummation. Simply stated, the idea of the kingdom of God succinctly encapsulates the message that Christians are confronted with when they make the radical option for faith in Jesus who is the Christ.

The invitation to contribute this essay to this present volume outlined in precise terms the editor's expectation: *The idea of the Kingdom of God in African Christian Theology*. One unspoken presupposition of this title is that there exists in African Christian theology attempts to elaborate the idea of the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, the dearth of imagination that bedevils theological reflection in Africa does not spare this important tenet of Jesus' proclamation and praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader can consult with immense profit John Meier's excellent study of 'the kingdom of God' in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. II (New York: Doubleday, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1994), 237-506. I shall rely on his study for the initial clarification of the biblical idea of the kingdom of God. Equally useful for this study is NORMAN PERRIN, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. BRUCE CHILTON (Philadelphia/London: Fortress Press/SPCK, Issues in Religion and Theology 5, 1984), 92-106; RICHARD H. HIERS, *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970); RAYMOND E. BROWN, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 60-70; JOHN FUELLENBACH, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995); BRUCE CHILTON, *Pure Kingdom: Jesus' Vision of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996).

My initial research yielded meager results. This is an indication that unless one considers as significant Ghanaian Pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah's ideological twist: "Seek first the political kingdom", there is no serious attempt yet to relate this symbol, the kingdom of God, systematically to the African reality. Consequently, my attempt to explore the idea of the kingdom of God in African theology can hardly amount to a synthesis of preexisting or current approaches in the different schools of African theology<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, any treatment of the subject must at this present stage bear visible traits of originality. Theological imagination and innovation will be given a full and free reign, in the hope that one is setting in motion a precedent on a subject deemed particularly useful to contemporary African Christianity. The idea of the kingdom of God, as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels, allows room for such deployment of the theological imagination; it is a dynamic and a functional symbol whose multifaceted application is never exhausted by a single level of interpretation.

The thesis that I advance in this essay is that the reality of life on the African continent permits a unique interpretation of this pivotal symbol of Jesus' proclamation and mission. This interpretation should contribute to the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God, a hermeneutics previously dominated by the positions of Western theologians and exegetes. Albert Schweitzer, Adolf von Harnack and Rudolph Bultmann come to mind, but their tendency to confine the idea of the kingdom of God to the innocuous domain of the personal and private must be judged as woefully inadequate, at least in what concerns the African situation.

Restricting the debate to the question of whether the kingdom of God coincides with the church or vice versa is

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<sup>2</sup> There is, for example, Simon Maimela's attempt to relate Luther's idea of the twofold kingdom (kingdom of God ['children of Adam']) and (kingdom of the world ['all mankind']) to the South African situation of apartheid and white supremacist's regime. On this basis of this correlation he argues the case of the social role of the church, especially in the South African context. However, Maimela's article is not a direct study of Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels. SIMON S. MAIMELA, "The Twofold Kingdom: An African Perspective", in *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African and African-American Theologians*, ed. ALBERT PERO and AMBROSE MOYO (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 97-109.

another characteristically Western approach. The resolution of the resulting theological quandary has roots deep in the theological tradition of Roman North African doctor of the church, Augustine of Hippo. Fortunately, several years of theological research and debate have enlarged the ambit of our understanding of the idea of the kingdom of God. The significance of this symbol in the experience and expression of the Christian message has emerged with renewed vigor in contemporary theology. For this reason too, it is timely to consider what this symbol means in the context of the African reality.

The first section of this essay briefly explores and restates the Synoptic Gospels' idea of the kingdom of God. In the second part I propose a three-tier hermeneutical grid for understanding of the kingdom of God in African Christian theology. Far from rehashing the familiar interpretation of this central symbol, I will identify the contours or elements of a uniquely African interpretation without circumscribing it in watertight theological or exegetical categories. Finally, based on this hermeneutical grid, I will proffer an example of the idea of the kingdom of God in African Christian theology as it relates to the mission of the churches in Africa.

### THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Whichever terminology is preferred, the kingdom of God (the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God) is a symbol that ceaselessly overtakes its immediate referents in the Synoptic Gospels. Norman Perrin's preference for the term "tensive symbol" in describing its nature is apt here. One could say that from the moment of its appearance in the Synoptic Gospels, the rest of each evangelist's work is a labored commentary attempting to explore, explain and apply the highly 'elusive' resonances of the kingdom of God. This commentary also attempts to enlarge the Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God. Thus, the paradigmatic inauguration in Mark 1:15 of Jesus' public proclamation presupposes a link with a previous but still unfolding history of salvation as known to the Jews, which history attains a *kairos* moment at the time of Jesus' proclamation.

This idea of a link or continuity implies that the background of the kingdom proclamation of Jesus is deeply embedded in the teaching of the Old Testament. It is correct to say that, although the regular usage of the kingdom of God is limited to Jesus and the Synoptic redactors, the message it conveys, namely, God's universal sovereignty, finds immediate resonances in the collective (national) consciousness of the Jews. The basic idea is that God's reign or kingly rule, which marked the creation of the earth, stretches through all the moments of history and attains its consummation in an eschatological establishment of God's kingdom. This 'establishment' is not to be conceived as a geographically delineated territory or sphere. Rather, it is an effective and dynamic shorthand that signals the unsurpassable, universal presence of God as the overriding principle of all creation<sup>3</sup>. This notion recalls the Pauline idea of eschatological consummation when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

It is necessary to recall at this point Jesus' characteristic phrase, "The kingdom of God *may be compared to...*" This phrase prefaces his attempts to elucidate the meaning of the kingdom of God. Jesus' approximative symbols and imageries of the kingdom are 'plastic' enough on the question of its nature. Precisely they excite theological imagination beyond the Synoptic Gospels' orbit for understanding the idea of the kingdom of God. This approximation of the idea of the kingdom precludes any univocal conception or application of its meaning. One fascinating indication of the analogical use of this symbol can be detected in the fact that the Jews both knew and did not know what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. What the Jews understood (Zealots, Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, etc.) was in function of their immediate socio-political milieu, and their ideological agenda for reversing the oppressive elements of this milieu<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, whatever the Jews understood, it is conceivable that is

<sup>3</sup> In explicating the symbol Jesus sometimes employs spatio-temporal imageries. See, for example, Mark 14:25 par., which suggests a *day* when Jesus shall drink *in* the kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the excellent 'reexamination' of the Zealots' agenda by WILLA BOESAK, *God's Wrathful Children: Political Oppression and Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 69-107.

was related to the OT expectation that Yahweh will establish his kingdom on earth as a tangible reality. It is this expectation that perhaps grounds the belief of the Jews who "lived in the hope of seeing the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43 parr. See Mark 9:1, Matt. 16:28, Luke 9:27).

One immediate conclusion that could be drawn from the foregoing is that the idea of the kingdom of God has a familiar ring in African history just as it did in Jewish national history. Africa is home to ancient and modern kingdoms. As geopolitical entities, these kingdoms embodied at various times in history the hopes of particular African peoples for security and collective well-being under the rule of a king. Examples of these kingdoms abound on the continent. In Africa south of the Sahara there flourished (and declined) in succession the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai from the 11th through the 18th centuries. The latter part of this period also witnessed the emergence of several others: Benin, Dahomey, Yoruba, Kongo, Ashanti, Swazi, Ganda, Zulu, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The point of citing these examples is to show that Africans do have an experience of kingdoms as a territorial sphere, realm or domain subject to the effective rule of a king. While this understanding lacks any eschatological or apocalyptic component comparable to some strands of Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God, one could contend that the African understanding (of the kingdom of God) has been influenced by its historical experience of kingdoms. This assertion is aptly illustrated by the dominant interpretation of the kingdom of God in popular African religiosity. The common understanding that underlies its interpretation in this religiosity is the conviction that God will offer access to the kingdom as a reward to the 'saved' in the dramatic event of the 'rapture' (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17). This entrance into God's eschatological domain is what is understood as 'the kingdom of heaven' in popular African religiosity.

In the throes of present socioeconomic and political crises, it is a common occurrence for religious leaders in

<sup>5</sup> See BASIL DAVIDSON, *African Kingdoms* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1966); KEVIN SHILLINGTON, *History of Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Rev. ed. 1995); ELOCHUKWU UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 12-26.



Africa to offer their followers the understanding of the kingdom of God as an eschatological gathering of the pious: "The solution for most missionaries is to claim that the Gospel is concerned exclusively with spiritual matters, and that its goal is the preparation for the 'kingdom of heaven' not for the 'Kingdom of God' here on earth. Others justify themselves by suggesting that transformation of the social order is a matter of the future, but for the present the *status quo* must remain"<sup>6</sup>. Effectively this idea of the kingdom of God serves as a panacea for contemporary social crises. The result is too often a social escapism that denies the structural roots of the crises and freezes Christian social action or responsibility in the innocuous rhetoric of an otherworldly kingdom of God. In this context the radically subversive nature of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus pales into social passivity.

A second conclusion at this point relates to the fact that the message of the kingdom of God is heard in context. Jesus' audience heard and interpreted the message of the kingdom in the immediate context of economic and political oppression by the occupying Roman government. Understandably, the reaction of Jesus' apostles after the Easter event is couched in an expectation of the restoration of the Davidic rule as an embodiment of the promised messianic kingdom: "Lord, has the time come for you to restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6). That Jesus constantly attempts to adjust the dominant interpretation of the kingdom of God as a sociopolitical sphere in order to avoid any 'reductionism' is a fact. Yet, the question will need to be asked: What is the dominant context of the African continent in which the message of the kingdom of God is heard? This consideration allows us to explore and suggest what the idea of the kingdom of God implies in the African context.

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<sup>6</sup> J.N.K. MUGAMBI, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1995), 229.

## AN AFRICAN READING OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Before proceeding any further it is important to restate the basic position of this essay. The kingdom of God is a multifaceted notion whose content and intent cannot be exhausted by any single hermeneutical paradigm. An African proverb says: *I pointed out to you the stars but all you saw was the tip of my finger*. Each hermeneutics of the kingdom of God yields at best no more than a 'tip' of its finger. I suggest, as paradigm for interpreting the idea of the kingdom of God in the African context, a three-tier hermeneutical grid: annunciation (good news), denunciation (prophetic action), transformation (praxis). From this triple-sided approach emerges a model of the kingdom of God that bears an African imprint. It is important to note at the outset of this analysis that the three elements of this grid closely overlap and, therefore, are to be taken together.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS ANNUNCIATION

Mark 1:15 offers the clearest indication of the urgency and imminence of the kingdom of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand (has drawn near)..." (cf. Matt. 4:17). Perhaps of greater significance is the oft-ignored connection between this paradigmatic proclamation and the idea of 'gospel' (good news). Many exegeses and theologians consecrate a great deal of energy to the task of determining the precise meaning of the material terms (time, fulfillment, kingdom, arrival, proximity) of this declaration to the detriment of the meaning it conveys. In Mark's unique evangelical agenda this proclamation is in fact the good news: The markan Jesus "proclaimed the gospel from God saying, '*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand*'". Matthew and Luke both make the same connection: "He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom..." (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). "Now it happened that after this he made his way through the towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1; cf. 9:11). The implication of this connection



is that the kingdom of God is *the* gospel. Accordingly, Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako notes that: "[T]he Gospel as the 'good news to the poor' is the good news of God's kingdom and God's justice. It follows therefore that the Gospels's content is defined by what it means to the poor, namely, justice, just relationships, with God, among humans and with the environment..."<sup>7</sup>. This assertion relates the idea of the kingdom in African Christianity to a series of challenges and, at the same, reveals its precise meaning in an African context.

If the kingdom of God is the good news of Jesus, which — as indicated above — is heard in context, it must, therefore, speak to the situation of the African continent where it is proclaimed. There is a glaring paradox in the idea of the kingdom of God as good news in an African setting. Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum of Dakar (Senegal) poignantly depicted this paradox at the African Synod in 1994. How, he queried, in a continent so full of bad news, can the gospel be 'good' news? Stated differently, how can the idea of the kingdom of God portend good news at a time "when our [African] identity is being crushed in a mortar of merciless chain of events"?<sup>8</sup> Another bitter remark by an African Christian painfully expresses the frustration inherent in this paradox: "The Gospel may be good news indeed; but it has ceased to be good news to many of our people".

The above point can be further illustrated. If the statistics of the 1996 *United Nations Human Development Report* are to be believed, one third of Africa's total population lives in a situation of real starvation. This precarious situation is aggravated by violent armed conflicts, which in turn have produced on the continent the world's largest population of refugees. Furthermore, of the forty-three poorest countries of the world, thirty-two are in Africa south of the Sahara. In addition, the continent holds the record for the highest rates

<sup>7</sup> KWAME BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 146.

<sup>8</sup> *Message of the Synod* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1994), no. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in ELIZABETH ISICHEI, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 170.

of infant mortality. These statistics paint a gory panorama of a continent living in perpetual 'state of a holocaust'<sup>10</sup>. In Africa, therefore, the poor and the marginalized are not just a mere negligible class or agglomeration of classes. The poor in Africa are whole nations, whole peoples.

This gruesome panorama is not without implications for the idea of the kingdom of God. Precisely that is the point of this argument, that the idea of the kingdom of God in African Christianity must mean good news: food for the hungry, health for the sick, home for the refugee, peace for the troubled, and justice for the oppressed. This is the meaning of the idea of God's kingdom in Africa when it is considered — as I propose it should — *the* good news. As Kenyan theologian J. N. K. Mugambi contends:

The Good News which Jesus proclaims to the world is not theoretical. It is practical. It is news which in real life rehabilitates individuals and groups that are marginalized by various natural and social circumstances. In contemporary Africa, the Good News understood in this way ought to rehabilitate the afflicted individuals in every region, country and locality. The Gospel ought to help Africans regain their confidence and hope...<sup>11</sup>.

This assertion finds its ultimate foundation in the preaching and teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. The examples could be multiplied but two will suffice to illustrate the point of this assertion.

First, one imagery or parable of the kingdom that is common in the Synoptic Gospels is the imagery of the wedding feast or banquet: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a feast for his son's wedding..." (Matt. 22:2; cf. Luke 14:16-24). This imagery of the kingdom is particularly relevant to Africa, where the idea of a feast conveys a

<sup>10</sup> Cf. EFOE-JULIEN PENOUKOU, *Eglises d'Afriques: propositions pour l'avenir* (Paris: Karthala, 1984), 92.

<sup>11</sup> MUGAMBI, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 176. My position in this essay is that it is not enough to 'rehabilitate' the marginalized and oppressed African people. The situation in Africa calls for a massive transformation of socioeconomic and political structures.

meaning that subsumes not just the immediate action of eating, but also the experience of inclusive fellowship in community, and the healing of rifts in social and personal relationships. An African proverb on the social value of feasting says: *Those who eat together do not eat one another*. One can equally recall here the apt reminder of the essence of feasting and eating in Africa by one of the character's in Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*: "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so"<sup>12</sup>. Luke, the evangelist, interjects: "Blessed is the one who will share the meal in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15; cf. Rom. 14:17). This is not to suggest that for Africans the "meal of the kingdom" dissolves into a mere eschatological utopia. Hardly. On the contrary, it must satisfy the contemporary deafening yearnings of Africans for bread that sates their hunger, and a meal that forges the bond of communion between African peoples torn apart by strife and violence.

The second example concerns the composition of Jesus's audience. The 'auditors' of Jesus' proclamation of the good news of the kingdom are the sick, who are afflicted by different kinds of illnesses. Matthew establishes a striking connection between Jesus' mission of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and his action of "curing all kinds of diseases and illnesses among the people" (Matt. 4:23, 9:35; cf. Mark 1:39, 3:7-12; Luke 6:17-19). The reason for highlighting this aspect of the idea of God's kingdom is that it has a particular appeal in the African continent stricken by diseases of phenomenal proportions. The devastating scourge of AIDS has attained an epic proportion in the continent where one African out of every forty is HIV+. The situation is further compounded by the lack of adequate health facilities and infrastructures. A great deal of bitter truth is contained in the

<sup>12</sup> CHINUA ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, First published in 1959), 166-167. See also JOSEPH HEALEY and DONALD SYBERTZ, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa), 254-290.

statement that "Africa is, quite literally, a sick continent"<sup>13</sup>. Besides, "even if AIDS [or the other ravaging diseases] could be stopped by a single glass of clean water ...most Africans would still have no access to the cure"<sup>14</sup>. The idea of the kingdom of God in Africa means health, freedom from the oppression of sickness and diseases.

Considered therefore at the first level of the three-tier hermeneutical grid, the idea of the kingdom of God is the annunciation of *the* good news in the context of bad news. Theological reflection on this "continent of misery" cannot make abstraction of this context — in which this good news of the kingdom is proclaimed — without losing its claim to credibility and relevance: "The objective poverty of the African people stares the African church and its theology in the face as both claim to bring these same people the liberating message of Christ's gospel. To do theology in Africa today and wink at the dehumanizing conditions of Africa's socioeconomic reality involves what John Calvin called 'nefarious perfidy', because this not only constitutes a betrayal of the gospel itself, but also the freedom of God's own people"<sup>15</sup>. Yet, if the idea of the kingdom of God in Africa is the annunciation of something radically new, it is also a denunciation of the status quo.

### THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS DENUNCIATION

The idea of the kingdom of God, as it is presented in the Synoptic Gospels, sets itself in judgement, here and now, against other opposing *kingdoms*. These 'kingdoms' possess their own dynamics and act in view of carefully defined ends. One example of this opposition between the kingdom of God and other 'kingdoms' is found in the Beelzebub controversy, which pitted Jesus' proclamation against the obstinacy of the Jewish authorities. In this controversy Jesus alludes to the kingdom of Satan (cf. Mark. 3:22-27). The con-

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in JEFFREY GOLDBERG, "Our Africa Problem", *New York Times Magazine*, March 2, 1997, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> EMMANUEL MARTEY, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 50.

clusion to this controversy is rendered with a note of urgency in Luke 11:20: "But if it is through the finger of God that I drive devils out, then the kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares" (cf. Matt. 12:28). There is an unmistakable suggestion here of the irruption of the kingdom of God in the midst of opposition to Jesus' proclamation. Furthermore, in this controversy the drama of vicious opposition and tension between Jesus and the constituted religious and political authorities unfolds with increasing intensity. The denunciatory tone of Jesus' proclamation becomes equally pungent. One can recall, for example, the sevenfold indictment of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:13-32 par.). What is the relevance of this observation?

It was pointed out above that Africa has been and still is home to constituted kingdoms. With alarming intensity these kingdoms have become the private domains of despotic rulers, who plunder with impunity the vast resources of their political domain and 'bind' — as do 'unclean spirits' — most of the African people in poverty, ignorance and misery. A very appropriate analogy can be made here between the terminology of 'strong man', a pointed reference to Satan in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 12:29, Mark 3:27, Luke 11:21-22), and the growing number of African political leaders, civilian and military, who characteristically wear the title 'strong man'. The example is too obvious to warrant mentioning names. A close look at the method of operation of these African strong men reveals a scenario of tyranny, despotism, myriad forms of abuse of power and violation of human rights. If the idea of the kingdom of God in the context of Africa means good news, one cannot deny the fact that it is to such situations that this good news must be addressed. In other words, the good news of the kingdom of God assumes the character of a prophetic denunciation of oppressive socioeconomic and political structures. It also confronts these structures with alternative praxis based on the idea of the kingdom of God.

In sum, the thesis proposed in this section is that, in Africa, the idea of the kingdom of God calls for the prophetic denunciation of these 'strong men' (despots) and their 'kingdoms' (oppressive structures). Jesus' denunciation and



'plunder' of the kingdom of the 'strong man' sets the example. This idea of effective denunciation of the 'kingdoms' of African despotic rulers is not a mere rhetorical trifle. It carries with it a concrete risk, as can be seen, for example, in the following realistic response by the Ndebele (Zimbabwe) to the missionary enterprise: "We like to learn and hear about God and His Word but if we say openly that we belong to King Jesus, then we shall be accused of disloyalty to [King] Lobengula and of Witchcraft and killed"<sup>16</sup>. Allegiance to the kingdom of God is a risky subversion of the structures and 'kingdoms' of oppression.

The upshot of the foregoing is the basic presupposition that we must extend the meaning of the Beelzebub controversy beyond the ambit of exorcism and speak of it in terms of structures which set themselves against the reign of God. Through such extension, the idea of the kingdom of God emerges as a potent symbol for confronting and denouncing institutionalized dictatorship and abuse of power in Africa. For Africans, the idea of the kingdom of God includes the notion that: "To the kingdoms of the world there is an alternative and overarching kingdom, the Kingdom of God, to which the kingdoms of the world must bow and submit.... Undoubtedly Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God was not perceived as other worldly or as politically neutral by the authorities of his day"<sup>17</sup>.

There exists yet another sense in which the idea of the kingdom of God can be conceived as a symbol of denouncing oppressive 'kingdoms' that resist the effective and universal establishment of the reign of God. Besides political oppression, there are other 'kingdoms' that afflict the African continent. These are often founded on carefully constructed models of injustice. The Cold War is an example of a type of

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in ISICHEI, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa*, 243; cf. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church*, 72-78. See also Monrovia's Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis' excellent analysis of the factors that lead to dictatorship and make "the temporary tenure of office (in Africa) not fully comprehensible, not necessarily required by the population, and not at all acceptable to the office holder". MICHAEL K. FRANCIS, "The Church in Africa Today: Sacrament of Justice, Peace, and Unity", in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, Africa Faith and Justice Network (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 119-130.



structural injustice which unleashed a wave of bloody conflicts across the continent. The enduring effects of this era linger, although the Western nations who fought their proxy wars on the turf of the continent have withdrawn into their characteristic shell of indifference. As Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela succinctly puts it: "For them, Africa has ceased to matter"<sup>18</sup>. Another example of such structures or kingdoms of injustice is the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), which purposes to extricate the entire continent from the external 'debt trap' but lacks the needed innovation to stimulate effective economic growth and development. The point of this argument is that in this situation *also* the denunciatory character of the idea of the kingdom of God from the perspective of African theology finds material for prophetic action. Bediako expresses well the essence of this argument: "In other words, it is from the standpoint of the liberation of the Kingdom of God that theological activity can confront the 'other kingdom' which 'breeds poverty, destitution, injustice, tears, hard-heartedness, iniquity, discord and war, intolerance and persecution'"<sup>19</sup>.

Prophetic denunciation, however, does not exhaust the meaning of the kingdom of God in the African context. Without a doubt, Jesus' denunciation of the unjust structures of his day was in clear anticipation of the inauguration of a new era, the era of God's universal reign: The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is close at hand! Although the contours of its eschatological consummation remained imponderable, the transforming effects of God's reign were already discernible in the mighty works and words of Jesus and in his call to repentance and faith: Repent, and believe in the gospel! The trajectory of the kingdom's message stretches from annunciation through denunciation to transformation; what is announced is truly realized in the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. What does this third level of our hermeneutical grid entail?

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<sup>18</sup> JEAN-MARC ELA, "The Church-Sacrament of Liberation", in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa*, 161.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS TRANSFORMATION

I suggested, in the preceding section, the need to effect a radical departure from the dominant idea of the kingdom of God in popular African Christianity; that is, the idea that it is a reward whose conferment is withheld until the hereafter, and whose beneficiaries are Christians who have lived a pious life devoid of social action in this present age. In other words,

African Christians have been taught to seek the transformation of the religious sector, to save their souls. How this movement is related to the transformation of the whole society and the total person has often been left unsatisfactorily answered. There have been places and times when a good Christian would be one who kept aloof from politics which ...[is] dirty, from economics which endanger one's salvation of the soul, from culture which can taint pure Christian faith, from development which erodes the good virtues of Christianity<sup>20</sup>.

In the face of widespread misery and hardships this oversimplified idea of the kingdom of God loses all its justification: "For Africans, a God who saves tomorrow is not a saving God"<sup>21</sup>. In Africa, the idea of the kingdom of God is inseparable from the radical transformation of structures that condition or determine the context of life. Only a flawed understanding of the content of Jesus' proclamation polarizes evangelism (saving souls) and socio-political involvement: both are parts of the Christian duty<sup>22</sup>.

The argument can be taken further by asserting that the idea of the kingdom of God as touching life integrally, that is, all the conditioning factors of life in community, jibes well with the integral and holistic nature of the African's religious imagination or world view. This imagination or world view

<sup>20</sup> JOHN MARY WALIGGO, "Christianity and Liberation in Africa: Some Obstacles", in *Towards African Christian Liberation*, L. NAMWERA, A. SHORTER, et al, (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1990), 32.

<sup>21</sup> HEALEY and SYBERTZ, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 176.

<sup>22</sup> BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa*, 141; cf. EUGENE HILLMAN, *Toward an African Christianity* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 12-25.

touches and embraces all aspects of nature<sup>23</sup>. The parables of the seed (Mark 4:26-29), the dandelion (Matt. 13:24-30), the mustard seed (Mark 4: 30-32 par.), and the yeast (Matt. 13:33, Luke 13:20-21) preclude any interpretation that separates the eschatological 'action' of the kingdom of God from the concrete history of the world. If anything, these parables suggest the inter-penetration of the eschatological kingdom of God and unfolding human history. This incursion of the kingdom of God into human history is less a violent eruption than a silent, but potent, irruption which transforms from within the whole of human history. "For look, the kingdom of God is in your midst!" (Luke 17:21).

The prayer of African Christians is: "Father God, let your Kingdom come in this land [here and now]!"<sup>24</sup>. It is the prayer of all Africans who believe that the kingdom of God bears a transforming impact on their conditions of life. God's kingdom becomes manifest in the radical transformation of those structures that oppress, dominate, enslave and marginalize human beings.

Jean-Marc Ela has suggested that: "Because of our situation, Africa must be perceived at its heart to be one of the privileged poles of liberation"<sup>25</sup>. This declamation is not to be adorned as a flattering epithet; it is a haunting reminder of the challenges that Africa poses to any idea of the kingdom of God that dares to be optimistic. The following argument seeks to make two points. First, the idea of the kingdom of God in African theology means the effective transformation of currently unjust and oppressive structures. Secondly, the church in Africa should not eschew the challenge to be at the vanguard of this project of transformation. To illustrate the first point I will draw from the resources of the 1994 African Synod. For the second point, the writings of South African theologian and anti-apartheid crusader Dr. Allan Boesak will be used to point out concrete vistas for the engagement of

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<sup>23</sup> See AYLWARD SHORTER, *Christianity and the African Imagination: After the Synod Resources for Inculturation* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1996), 21-25.

<sup>24</sup> ISICHEI, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 141.

<sup>25</sup> ELA, "Church—Sacrament of Liberation", 133.

the churches in Africa in the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God.

### THE AFRICAN SYNOD

The sixth chapter of John Paul II's Final Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, is aptly titled: 'Building the Kingdom' (nos. 105-126). At first glance, the idea of the kingdom of God is epitomized by two closely interrelated notions: justice and peace. The kingdom of God means justice and peace. These two notions define the content of the church's mission: "The Church as the Family of God in Africa must bear witness to Christ also by promoting justice and peace on the Continent and throughout the world" (no. 106). Besides this mandate, the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom obligates all Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike, to engage in the "promotion of integral human development" (no. 109). The specific elements of this integral human development include the entrenchment of "the rule of law" in all the spheres of life on the continent, the eradication of corruption in the interrelated areas of politics and the economy, the alleviation of crushing foreign debts, an end to the fratricidal wars, arms trade, and those customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due them.

The Synod's vision of promoting justice and peace, and integral human development, squares well with the idea of the kingdom of God presented in the Synoptic Gospels. Furthermore, it places the task of effecting this promotion at the doorsteps of the church in Africa: "The African church has understood that to establish the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus Christ, it must carry on the task of transforming unjust structures in society and within itself"<sup>26</sup>. This affirmation sets the stage for the examination of the second component of this section: the mission of the churches in Africa and the idea of the kingdom of God.

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<sup>26</sup> JUAN G. MONROY, "A Church Committed to Justice and Peace", in *What Happened at the African Synod?*, ed. CECIL MCGARRY (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1995), 117.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCHES IN AFRICA: AN EXAMPLE

If the idea of the kingdom of God in African theology culminates in the transformation of the unjust structures and conditions of life, the mission of the churches cannot be defined without taking the theme of liberation into consideration. Alan Boesak has developed a theological reflection that focuses on the mission of the churches in Africa in actualizing the transformative meaning of the kingdom of God. Other lines of approach exist in African theology of liberation. The merit of Boesak's approach lies in the fact that it has effectively contributed to the transformation of the socioeconomic and political landscape of South Africa. Thus, the overriding interest in my choice of approach is its effectiveness.

How can the churches in Africa recommit themselves to the mission to transform society according to the paradigm of the kingdom of God? What is the mission of the churches in Africa, especially in a situation of injustice and oppression such as exists on the African continent? Boesak offers a new paradigm for rethinking the notion of mission based on the idea of the kingdom of God. His insights originated from a real rather than an ideal situation of the continent.

### *A Church in Situation*

One insight that emerges clearly in Boesak's writings is the idea that the church in Africa needs to be a church-in-situation<sup>27</sup>. The church ought to 'pitch its tent' in the midst of the real life situation of the continent. It is here that the church is called to embrace — and imbue with Christian meaning — the joy and the hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of this continent, especially those who are poor and afflicted in myriad ways, as its own joy and hope, grief and anguish<sup>28</sup>. In this situation of grief and anguish the

<sup>27</sup> I adopt the singular 'church' in this analysis with the understanding that whatever is said here concerns all the churches and ecclesial bodies in Africa.

<sup>28</sup> This is an adaptation of the much quoted opening lines of Vatican Council II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December, 1965.



church in Africa receives and actualizes its mission to proclaim the good news of the reign of God. The historical situation in which the church in Africa finds itself is one which

In too many places too many children die of hunger, and too many persons just disappear because they dare to stand up for justice and human rights. Too many are swept away by the tides of war, and too many are tortured in dungeons of death. In too many eyes the years of war have extinguished the fires of hope and joy, and too many bodies are bowed down by the weight of that particularly repugnant death called despair. Too many young persons believe that their youth and their future are already powdered to dust...<sup>29</sup>.

This list of humanly contrived (and natural) woes can be extended indefinitely, but the central point here is that it describes the situation that exists in all parts of the continent with minimal exception.

To admit that the church in Africa is a church-in-situation is not merely to proffer an empty theological statement. It is a commitment to *see* and *embrace* the people of God to whom is addressed the liberating message of the kingdom. Undeniably, these people of God cannot be perceived as anyone other than the men and women, believing and unbelieving, who suffer the wounds inflicted on them by structures of injustice and oppression. Consequently, the church in Africa cannot absolve itself from its mission to be a church in a wounded continent: "For Africa is a wounded continent, and the wounds have not yet healed"<sup>30</sup>.

Quite undeniably, therefore, the mission of the church becomes inseparably linked to the fate of the continent. In a continent afflicted by innumerable ills, the mission of the church is indiscernible apart from that situation of evil which oppresses the people of God<sup>31</sup>. The challenge here is for the

<sup>29</sup> ALLAN BOESAK, *If This is Treason, I am Guilty* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 28-29.

<sup>30</sup> ALLAN BOESAK, *Black and Reformed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. ALLAN BOESAK, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 66-67.



church, in whatever community it finds itself on the continent, "[T]o identify with the past, the present and the future of the community that it serves.... [B]ecome a part of that community, so that it may understand the joys, sorrows, and aspirations of that community"<sup>32</sup>. Becoming a part of the struggle of the community amounts to imbuing that struggle with a distinctively liberating "Christian presence", and "taking responsibility for the historical reality into which the kingdom of God has entered"<sup>33</sup>. In the light of the foregoing, the mission of the church has nothing to do with engaging in a power tussle with political leaders. History teaches that such struggle to assert the so-called religious power of spiritual leaders over the secular power of temporal rulers has hindered rather than advanced the mission of the church in the world<sup>34</sup>.

In the light of the foregoing, the church's realization of its mission of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom must be characterized by the virtue of compassion. The first decisive step in the experience of compassion is to embrace the actual, not virtual or ideal, situation of suffering. Yet, 'to embrace the situation' does not imply a masochistic complacency nurtured by a vain hope in God's reward outside the realm of human history. Mission informed by compassion implies active solidarity. It seeks to heal, not placate:

First of all, healing presupposes brokenness and hurt. To recognize the hurt and brokenness in African churches and nations means to identify the causes of that brokenness. It means understanding that brokenness in terms of political, economic, and social realities as well as in terms of human alienation and suffering.

Secondly, healing asks for the kind of solidarity with victims that does not come through formal acceptance of a creed, but through the sharing of the pain, by taking upon oneself the hurt of others. This at once opens a third perspective: it is the brokenhearted God, the suffering Servant of the Lord, who heals. In other words,

<sup>32</sup> BOESAK, *Black and Reformed*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 74.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, LEONARDO BOFF, *The Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 51ff.

true healing comes through the willingness to suffer, to take upon oneself the brokenness of the other<sup>35</sup>.

The conclusion that can be drawn at this point is that to be a church-in-situation — a church immersed in the concrete realities of human life — is to face an inexorable challenge that subjects the credibility and relevance of the church's mission, as well as its identity as an agent of transformation, to scrutiny in any given situation or context. Thus the church finds itself challenged to bear witness to the good news of the kingdom not merely as vehicle for transmitting the message of salvation and liberation, but more importantly as an agent and community of compassion, solidarity and justice.

If the church in Africa is the church in the world, where the kingdom of God is already present and active, it is confronted, then, with the challenge to dare to be church: "The quest is for a church that dares to be *church*, that dares ...as did its Lord, to side with the poor and the downtrodden and to liberate the oppressed"<sup>36</sup>. One might ask, therefore, as does Boesak: "Will the churches of Africa be able to do all this?"<sup>37</sup>. This question helps to focus the discussion on the issue of neutrality.

### *The False Path of Neutrality*

There is evidence to suggest that in many instances the church in Africa has become neutral. In other words, the clergy or church leaders have become indifferent to the situation of the children of God, the Family of God. A church that is neutral or indifferent to the situation of injustice in which it claims to be church loses credibility and relevance. It betrays its mission of proclaiming the good news of the

<sup>35</sup> BOESAK, *Black and Reformed*, 75-76; see also ALLAN BOESAK, "Reconciliation and Liberation in Black Theology" (Toronto: Ecumenical Forum of Canada, 1979), 4-5; ALLAN BOESAK and CHARLES VILLA-VICENCIO eds., *A Call for an End to Unjust Rule* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1986), 155.

<sup>36</sup> ALLAN BOESAK, *Farewell to Innocence* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 148.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

kingdom of God. It ceases to be a true *ekklesia*, that is, the eschatological gathering of God's chosen people.

The advantage of placing the church in situation, as Boesak does, is that it reveals the hypocrisy and the impossibility of claiming innocence, neutrality or indifference. For "when the situation is as clear and unmistakable as it is with us, and when the cry of the poor and the wretched rises day and night to God, and injustice is there for everyone to see, then it is unforgivable for Christians to try to be neutral..."<sup>38</sup>. The people of God are the same men and women who labor under the yoke of blatant injustice and oppression. Any separation of Christian life and the socioeconomic and political conditions that affect this life creates a false dichotomy. Furthermore, to claim neutrality regarding these conditions amounts to a certain kind of 'heathenism'<sup>39</sup>. The point cannot be overemphasized that the situation of Africa is also the situation of the church in Africa. Whatever mark of injustice afflicts the men and women of our times also afflicts the body of Christ, because "we are the church": "We are the body of Christ. And as long as these things happen, we know that the body of Christ is being broken every single day. As long as these things happen, Christ is again persecuted, denied, and crucified"<sup>40</sup>.

The grave effects of neutrality become more evident when considered as a form of partiality. In sum, in the context of the continent, a church that is neutral takes sides with the oppressor: "Neutrality is the most reprehensible partiality there is. It means choosing for those in power, choosing for injustice, without taking responsibility for it. It is the worst sort of politics, and the most detestable sort of 'Christianity' there is"<sup>41</sup>.

If the church in Africa cannot maintain neutrality in a situation of social conflict, it therefore means that it must make clear choices. Boesak asserts: "The church must

<sup>38</sup> ALLAN BOESAK, *The Finger of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 29; see also Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 1-7.

<sup>39</sup> BOESAK, *The Finger of God*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> BOESAK, *If This is Treason*, 128.

<sup>41</sup> BOESAK, *The Finger of God*, 29; see also, *Black and Reformed*, 75. Evidently the same critique applies to an African theology that is silent and indifferent, which collaborates with any structure of social injustice. See BOESAK, *Farewell to Innocence*, 34; *Walking on Thorns*, (Geneva: WCC, 1984), 24.

choose. Either we are on our way to the new Jerusalem [the kingdom of God] or we perish with Babylon"<sup>42</sup>. The importance of making clear choices for justice precludes what Boesak aptly terms the "Reuben option". This latter describes that calculated lack of courage to opt for justice and embrace the risk of being church in a situation of social conflict. It is the uncomfortable state of mind of a church that has substituted the radical witness to the good news of the kingdom of God for the transient goal of survival and self-preservation<sup>43</sup>. The task facing the church in Africa is to become a "confessing church" or a "resurrection-church"; a church that is intolerant of injustice. The option to become a "confessing church" inevitably places it on the path of confrontation with the forces of injustice and oppression:

A confessing church is not simply a church with a confession. It is a church which stands by the demands of the gospel no matter what the demands of the 'times', the 'situation', or the 'powers that are'. It is a church which challenges the world, not on the basis of power or arrogance but on the basis of our understanding and sharing of the suffering of God's children in the world. It is a church which learns to hear the voice of God in the cries of the suffering, the poor, and the oppressed<sup>44</sup>.

An echo of this notion of a confessing church reverberates in the African Synod's Final Exhortation: "The Church as the Family of God in Africa must bear witness to Christ also by promoting justice and peace on the Continent and throughout the world... The Church's witness must be accompanied by a firm commitment to justice and solidarity by each member of God's people"<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> BOESAK, *Comfort and Protest*, 38; Boesak, *Walking on Thorns*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Here it is important to recall the poignant observation by Danish martyr Kaj Munk regarding church symbolism: "The signs of the church have always been the dove, the lamb, the lion, and the fish, but never the chameleon". Quoted in BOESAK, *If this is Treason*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> BOESAK and VILLA-VICENCIO, *A Call for an End to Unjust Rule*, 154.

<sup>45</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *The Church in Africa: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 1995), no. 105.

### *Proclamation and Liberation*

The mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in words and deeds, just as Jesus did. The specific goal of this mission is liberation, God's gratuitous offer of salvation which transforms human life and structures. This implies that it does not suffice for the church to be in situation. It must make concrete choices based on the demands of the kingdom of God. Fidelity to this latter is a yardstick for measuring the church's accountability. The demand and promise of the kingdom of God find fulfillment in the effective liberation of the people of God from the yoke of oppression (cf. Luke 4:18-19). The church's radical option for this demand constitutes the touchstone of its authenticity and credibility in Africa. It is the mark of a true church. For if the message of Christ is the message of liberation,

His message of liberation is [also] the message of the church in the world. This is the message the church in Africa must proclaim if it is to be authentic. It is the message of the God of the Bible: what God did for the people of Israel, God can do again today. It is the message that he who came to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord is still the head of the church today<sup>46</sup>.

The Scripture abounds with references to liberation as the central theme of God's relationship with the world. In fact, Boesak notes, "Nothing is more central to the Old Testament proclamation than the message of liberation. God's history with Israel is a history of liberation. Yahweh's great act of liberation forms the content of the life and faith, the history and confession of Israel..."<sup>47</sup>. Similarly: "The message of liberation forms the *cantus firmus* of the proclamation of the New Testament. Jesus did not alienate himself from the prophetic proclamation of liberation.... Jesus purposely places himself in the prophetic tradition of preaching the liberation message, offering himself as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies"<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> BOESAK, *Black and Reformed*, 74; see also *Farewell to Innocence*, 147.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 17ff.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



A quick glance at the African continent cannot but reveal the faces of millions of Africans who yearn to hear the word of the kingdom that liberates them from oppression and slavery. As Boesak rightly contends, they seek

A word that shows the way out of the darkness of oppression, poverty, and misery. A word that is an inspiration to active participation in God's struggle for justice and liberation, yet at the same time is not itself an expression of demagoguery. A word that holds on to the truth that God is on the side of the oppressed...<sup>49</sup>.

That word is the good news of the kingdom of God.

It is in the midst of this deep yearning that the church discovers the nature and meaning of its mission. No amount of ingeniously contrived theological disquisitions can absolve the church in Africa from proclaiming the word of liberation in a situation of conflict. Liberation is integral, just as the idea of the kingdom of God implies God's universal reign over all the spheres of creation. It permeates all facets of human existence. To proclaim the word of liberation and opt for the least of God's people is what it means for the church to be a prophetic church. Prophecy is "much less predicting the future than contradicting the present"<sup>50</sup>. A prophetic church takes a critical distance vis-a-vis the ideology of the structures and perpetrators of injustice. It refuses to be seduced by the trappings of power and domination, "because its loyalty is not to any party or grouping, but ultimately to the Lord and his kingdom"<sup>51</sup>. In effect, the ultimate source of the liberating praxis of the prophetic church is found in Jesus Christ, whose praxis it proclaims and lives by: "It is the Word of God which is the critique of all human actions and which holds before us the norms of the kingdom of God"<sup>52</sup>.

The central point of this argument relates to the nature and content of the proclamation of the kingdom of God in a

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<sup>49</sup> BOESAK, *The Finger of God*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> BOESAK, *Walking on Thorns*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> BOESAK, *If This is Treason*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



situation of social tension and conflict. Briefly stated: proclamation is praxis-oriented. According to Boesak, it is a "holy rage" for freedom and justice<sup>53</sup>. It means active commitment to the liberation of the children of God from the shackles that bind them to inhuman conditions of living. Such a praxis-oriented proclamation will not permit the church to shrink from confronting the forces and structures of injustice in society. It is not an exercise in futility to recall several instances in Africa where fervent prayer for the end of unjust rule, and disobedience to civil authority become not just a Christian responsibility but the honorable way out for the Christian<sup>54</sup>; "where words and statements will no longer suffice.... [Where] the church must initiate and support meaningful pressure on the entrenched system, as a nonviolent way of bringing about change"<sup>55</sup>; and, finally, "where the church has to offer a prophetic witness to the state"<sup>56</sup>.

Generally, in the Catholic Church in Africa, when it comes to offering a prophetic witness to the state, the faithful, the church as the totality of its members, rely on the reluctant hierarchy. The net result is often a passive resignation that condones the status quo rather than challenge and transform it. Leonardo Boff's observation is particularly relevant to the situation of the Catholic Church in Africa: "This institutional sclerosis has kept the Church from responding properly to the challenges of the modern world. It has become conservative and has created a deep chasm between the Church-as-people of God and the Church-hierarchy in terms of ecclesial practice, between the Church that thinks, speaks, and yet does not act and that Church which does not dare to think, cannot speak, yet acts"<sup>57</sup>.

An important consideration in the church's adoption of a prophetic stance vis-a-vis the state concerns the often-repeated declaration that the church has no business with politics: the church should stay out of politics. To buttress this contention the proponents of this idea quote copiously from

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54, 57; BOESAK, *Walking on Thorns*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> BOESAK and VILLA-VICENCIO, *A Call for an End to Unjust Rule*, 147, 151.

<sup>55</sup> BOESAK, *Black and Reformed*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>57</sup> BOFF, *The Church: Charism and Power*, 49.

Romans 13: "Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God" (Rom. 13:1). Two points are important in this regard.

First, there needs to be a clear understanding of the meaning of politics. Here Boesak's distinctions are very useful: "Put very simply, *politics* is the ordering, the organization of the political, social, and economic life of people within a state, in order to create and maintain a society which is as meaningful, just, and humane as possible"<sup>58</sup>. He continues: "Because this is so, and because politics has to do with people who are created in the image of God — people for whom he has in mind a life full of meaning, abundance, joy; people for whom Jesus Christ had given his life — therefore politics is also, very much so, the business of the church. The political responsibility of the church is to witness to God's demands for justice and peace, for a meaningful life for his people in the world"<sup>59</sup>. To carry out this responsibility, the church is guided by the norm of the kingdom of God, which "speaks to our total human condition and offers salvation that is total and complete"<sup>60</sup>.

Secondly, regarding Romans 13, only a seriously flawed *eisegesis* can use it as a justification for passive obedience to unjust and repressive systems of government. An authentic exegesis of the text sees in it the basis for a transforming social action, rather than a compromising docility. Precisely, as Boesak argues, this action is not "*in spite of Romans 13*", but "*because of Romans 13*": "Romans 13 is the foundation for Christian action and resistance to governmental powers who do not want to acknowledge that their authority is from God, and that they therefore have to reflect the power of this liberating, just God"<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> BOESAK, *If This is Treason*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Boff arrives at the same conclusion by drawing a distinction between Politics and politics. *Church: Charism and Power*, 26-29. See also PENOUKOU, *Eglises d'Afriques*, 57-79.

<sup>60</sup> BOESAK, *If This is Treason*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> BOESAK and VILLA-VICENCIO, *A Call for an End to Unjust Rule*, 148, 151; see also Boesak's 'A Letter to the South African Minister of Justice,' *Walking on Thorns*, 58-65.

## CONCLUSION: THE KINGDOM AS A SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR AFRICA

This essay on the idea of the kingdom of God in African theology is not an exegetical disquisition. It is primarily a theological interpretation of the central symbol of the public proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as documented in the Synoptic Gospels. Consequently, several issues traditionally connected with the kingdom debate have not been treated extensively. One of the issues is the contentious question of 'realized' *vs.* 'futurist' orientations of the kingdom of God. I take for granted that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God announced the impending end of the world through the imminent arrival and instrumentality of God's definitive reign over all creation. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence from the Synoptic Gospels shows that the imponderable *eschaton* is not without implications for *prevailing* socioeconomic and political structures.

Similarly this essay avoids the question of whether or not the church that Jesus intended is to be identified with the kingdom of God that he explicitly proclaimed, in which case the church is the actualization and realization in time or in anticipation of the *eschaton*<sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, the major thrust of the final section of this essay sufficiently argues the point that mission, as constitutive of the church, lies at the intersection of the relationship of the kingdom of God and the churches in Africa. Therefore, I have argued that the churches in Africa have a vital role in actualizing the three principal components — annunciation, denunciation and transformation — of the idea of the kingdom of God in an African context. The basis for this argument is that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God goes from annunciation, to denunciation and transformation. It is not only proclaimed in words. It is actively lived in deeds. The idea of the kingdom of God bears decisive implications for the real-life situation on the continent of Africa. In the present context of Africa, one important criterion for

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<sup>62</sup> It is perhaps important to note here that there exist some prophetic churches in Africa who clearly identify themselves as constituting exclusively the privileged kingdom of God, and where the leader(s) subsequently become(s) the 'savior'. See ISICHEI, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 292, 316, 349.

judging any community that lays claim to the title 'kingdom community' will be the degree to which it effectively adopts the three-tier kingdom praxis outlined above.

One of the aims of this essay is to make a contribution to the understanding of the Christian message, at the core of which lies the idea of the kingdom of God. Recently African theologians have capitalized on the so-called 'southward shift of Christianity's center of gravity'<sup>63</sup>. If this is the case, then a unique African interpretation of the fundamental symbols of Christianity, like the kingdom of God, is not only warranted; it must also become one of the regulating norms of theological reflection in Africa. One is again reminded here of the significant declaration of Paul VI in Kampala, 1969: "You may and you must have an African Christianity".

Finally, however, the fact must be conceded that a theological exploration of the idea of the kingdom of God in African theology does not immediately resolve the complex problems confronting the African continent. Reflection still needs to proceed to the level of praxis, for Africa remains a bleeding, suffering continent, whose survival is ceaselessly jeopardized by a conspiracy of internal and external circumstances. In this situation, I suggest that the most important component of the idea of the kingdom of God in Africa be *hope*: "In Africa today we are in great need of hope. Despite all the very demoralizing and frustrating propaganda, we need to affirm that tomorrow need not be like yesterday"<sup>64</sup>. Therefore, for this continent whose light is dimmed, ill-equipped to face the challenges of the future, the kingdom of God is highly and ultimately a symbol of hope. This dimension of hope is amply illustrated in the *Message of the Synod* and the Final Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. In this latter document the word 'hope' features as one of the most used terms, occurring thirty-three times<sup>65</sup>. Thus, beyond the de-

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<sup>63</sup> This notion is one of the principal presuppositions on which is founded Kwame Bediako's thesis in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. See also ELA, "The Church-Sacrament of Liberation", 131; MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflection on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 76.

<sup>64</sup> MUGAMBI, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 161.

<sup>65</sup> *New People* (Magazine), #39 November-December, 1995, 3.

spair and discouragement that stare Africa in the face, the kingdom of God looms large in the horizon like a mural of hope, inviting it to cross the precarious and shadowy threshold of time into the dazzling promises of the twenty-first century. This hope is neither a gift nor reward proffered at the end of a gloomy historical tunnel. It is a task and a mission that take effect within the unfolding history of the African continent.

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